

"Negotiating Spaces: Positions of Race, Gender, and Sexuality Across the Arts"

**Subverting the “*banlieue* girl identity” through gender performance
in Céline Sciamma’s *Bandes de Filles***

(SLIDE 1) *Bande de Filles – Girlhood*, is the story of Marieme, a young black woman living in the *banlieue*, who meets Lady, Adiatou and Fily, and becomes a member of their *girl gang* – the direct translation of the French title. At home, Marieme lives with an absent mother, and two young sisters she feels obligated to protect from their violent older brother. At school, Marieme wants to continue on to high school, but the guidance counselor wants to direct her toward a vocational school. Marieme is 16 years old and this is her story: she is a stereotypical figure of the young *banlieue* girl, living in a challenging social environment dominated by a masculine figure, expected to take over parental responsibility, failing academically and marginalized by the academic institution. This is the identity that is prescribed to young *banlieue* women, constructed on social stigmas, thus establishing the *banlieue* girl as a social category. In *Bande de Filles*, French director Céline Sciamma portrays Marieme as the speaker of these young girls who are trying to subvert and emancipate themselves from these preexisting norms of femininity tied into their identity.

I thus suggest that, in *Bande de Filles*, this emancipation takes the forms of different performances of gender (both performances of masculinity and femininity) taking place within and beyond the space of the *banlieue*. By examining the social performances of fights and dances of Sciamma’s *banlieue* girls, occurring in spaces such as the *banlieue* itself, the Parisian subway or even a hotel room, I will analyze the relationship between space, public performance, and gender, in order to ultimately determine whether or not these social performances of gender can become a sustainable instrument for challenging certain social categorizations.

Self-construction, exploration and gender bending are recurrent themes in Céline Sciamma's cinema, but with *Bande de Filles*, she goes a step further and talks about race and class in addition to gender as she creates an intersectional character who embodies the problem of social determinism associated with skin color, social environment and space on one hand, and sexuality and gender on the other. Sciamma thus undertakes the not so easy task of (SLIDE 2) "decolonizing the *banlieue* girl identity" (Mouflard, 118): she denounces the usual representations of a stereotyped femininity, one that is being forced upon young *banlieue* women and acts upon them as a colonizing force, thus taking away their capacity for self-determination.

To understand what is at stake in *Bandes de Filles*, it is important to rapidly go over some of the recurrent vocabulary in this analysis. *Banlieue*, for instance, literally translates to "suburbs", but does not carry the same social connotation as the English word. In France, just like in the United States, space in big cities is divided. But when in the United States, the center of cities is usually associated with lower classes and low income areas, and the suburbs associated with upper classes; in France, it is the opposite: the centers of cities are gentrified, while the suburbs, the infamous *banlieues* are associated with social housing, with low-income families, and typically, with people of color. It is within this consideration of space that we need to understand *Bande de Filles*: the *banlieue* is to be read as synonymous with social and spatial exclusion. So we can ask: how does Sciamma problematize this complex space in terms of race, class and gender? How is space negotiated? Is there a difference between public and private space? How much agency do our young women really have in the different kinds of space that Sciamma constructs for them, and how do they in turn construct and perform their own femininity within these spaces?

I will then organize my presentation around these questions. (SLIDE 3) I will first take a look at the consideration of female bodies within the space of the *banlieue*, whether it be public or private space. Then I will look at said bodies outside of the space of the *banlieue* and interpret the forms of gender performances they put up.

The *banlieue*: a space of hypermasculinity.

(SLIDE 4) The French *banlieue* is still considered as an extremely connoted space of social and geographical exclusion and is often represented in French cinema as a space of hyper masculinity, as movies like (SLIDE 5) *La Haine*, by Matthieu Kassovitz (1995) or *Ma 6-T va Crack-er*,

by Jean-François Richet (1997) suggest, in which the female gaze is almost non-present, if not completely absent. These two movies were praised for giving subjectivity back to ostracized young men evolving daily in a socially marginalized space, which in turn marginalizes them as well, and where confrontations with the police are commonplace. These two movies thus establish a model for the so-called “*film de banlieue*” – the *banlieue* film. However, with *Bande de Filles*, Céline Sciamma re-appropriated the codes of the *genre*, and instead of representing the *banlieue* as a space of hyper masculinity by putting ostracized young men in front of her camera, she shifts the perspective and gives visibility back to the young women evolving among these men.

(SLIDE 6) (But) From the very beginning of the movie, she signals the place and consideration of these young women within the space of the *banlieue* as the opening sequence shows us how they are subjected to masculine authority. The movie opens with an American football training session. The spectator would assume young men are training. But in reality, those strong, feisty players on the field are girls, hence bending expected gender norms. After training is over, they are heading home. They are loud and joyful, but as soon as they step into the space of the *banlieue*, the unified group disperses, the loud and joyful conversations lessen as the camera brings back the staring, predatory gaze of the young *banlieue* men in the frame. Just like Julia Dobson affirms, the *banlieue* appears as a (SLIDE 7) “space of the policing of femininity” (39). So there is indeed a confrontation with an oppressive, institutionalized authority in *Bande de Filles*, but it is not a governmental authority, it is the masculine other in charge of enforcing social norms of femininity.

It also seems that the private sphere does not have the potential to counter-balance the regulatory public space. This dynamic actually carries on in the private sphere as well, as represented by Marieme’s familial space. No mention is made of her father; and Sciamma assigns the fatherly responsibilities of surveying and policing female bodies to Marieme’s older brother. To signal this regulatory power, Sciamma stigmatizes female bodies, and more particularly female breasts and the need to hide this part of a woman’s body, because it is a symbol of femininity and signals the danger of female sexuality. The motif of the breasts is introduced during the first scene taking place in Marieme’s private sphere. She is playing around with her younger sister, and quickly realizes that her sister’s chest is starting to develop. At first, Marieme teases her sister, but as soon as the soundtrack suggests the return of the brother within the domestic space, once again the loud, joyful conversation fades away. Marieme then encourages her sister to wear only oversized T-shirts, in order to hide her chest.

What I see here is that, in turn, Marieme adopts a position of policing of the body which is presented as a masculine responsibility. Here, she performs codes of masculinity, which places her in an uncomfortable in-between position: she is both victim of the policing of the female body but in turn implements it. And yet again, this dynamic carries on whenever Marieme is pictured in the public space of the *banlieue*. As a way to escape the policing of her body, she is progressively performing codes of masculinity, such as the policing (as stated before), or violence. (SLIDE 8) The scene where Marieme is fighting another young woman from a different girl gang is here a great example. As she wins the fight, she brandishes her opponent's brassiere as a sign of victory, signaling yet again that revealing the chest marks the necessity of the physical domination of female bodies. Violence, usually associated with hyper-masculinity, is here a tool for Marieme to assert herself in public, but as she resorts to this specific code of masculinity, she is once again participating in the marking of female bodies as inferior.

Leaving the periphery

(SLIDE 9) The *banlieue* is thus represented as a space where young women are marked as female bodies available for policing, and the only form of resistance they can access is performances of masculinity in order to escape such control, which also comes with its shortcomings. (SLIDE 10) Formally, Sciamma attempts to represent this constant oppression of female bodies by setting them in the middle of high cement blocks thus closing up the space and imprisoning them. Furthermore, her use of scale allowed her to confine her characters in their social and spatial environment. However, the focal distance suggests that it is not the high buildings we need to look at, but those young women who live within them, because in this immobile space, they are in constant movement. They are indeed the only ones able to leave the peripheral space and to go to downtown Paris, a privilege that Sciamma does not grant to the masculine population of the *banlieue*.

What kind of space is downtown Paris, for these young women? Does it represent a space where they can escape the *banlieue* girl identity? One of the alternative spaces where Sciamma places her characters is the metro. (SLIDE 11) We see them in the midst of a verbal brawl with another girl gang, yelling at each other from one platform of the subway to the other, until both trains arrive. The four girls get in and start laughing, acknowledging the non-seriousness of the exchange, the purpose of which is not confrontation but catching people's attention. As Isabelle

McNeill puts it, (SLIDE 12) “[they take] pleasure in a noisy display of protest and dominance. They laugh together afterwards, acknowledging the event as a performance” (8). This scene suggests that spatial mobility and the ability to access alternative, public spaces allow them to break away from their prescribed essence and to use social performance as a modality of the femininity they are (re)inventing for themselves outside of the *banlieue*. In other words, being loud and literally recuperating their voice is a way to assert their existence and to be seen and heard as public performance has become an instrument of self-empowerment.

However, Céline Sciamma is aware that this dialectic (peripheral space = essence vs central space = performance) is not sustainable: even though their femininity is not as controlled, they are still socially marked by their skin color and the fact that they come from the *banlieue*. (SLIDE 13) Indeed, as they are looking around a clothing store, the camera introduces the only white character of the movie, the young clerk whose paleness contrasts with the dark skins of Marieme and her friends. The white woman starts following the group, suspicious that they might steal something. Lady confronts her quite forcefully, and they leave the scene. Again, they laugh it out, acknowledging the event as a performance, but they were nonetheless reminded of the social stigma associated with their skin color, which is also tied into the *banlieue* girl identity. In other words, even though they represent spaces where the girls get to reinvent and perform their own codes of femininity, public spaces in central Paris are not sustainable alternatives as the *banlieue* girl identity is still heavily tied up in their bodies.

“Rented space”

(SLIDE 14) The question now is: is there a space where our four girls can truly subvert the *banlieue* girl identity? Does a space of unconditional existence exist in the film? It was important for Sciamma to create such a space. She thus places them in what Marc Augé would identify as a “non-lieu” – a non-space, in the form of a hotel room. Sciamma constructs this space as a neutral space, neither public nor private, neither central nor peripheral, where they don’t have to *be* anything nor to pretend to be anything else other than themselves. It is a (SLIDE 15) “rented space” (Sciamma for Clap.CH), a place to exist, a place where they can just “shine bright like a diamond”.

The girl gang thus proposes another kind of social performance of femininity, as they address the spectator directly. Rihanna’s song *Shine Bright Like A Diamond* starts playing as (SLIDE

16) we have a close-up on Lady's face. She raises her head and starts lip-synching to the song, looking straight at the camera, thus breaking the fourth wall and inviting the spectator to look her in the eyes. By holding our gaze, she demands that we look at her, despite the marginalizing potential of our gaze. (SLIDE 17) Lady is then joined by the three other girls and they offer us a very intimate, authentic performance, inviting the spectator to see them as they really are, without the social assignations forced upon them and upon their bodies outside of that neutral space.

This dance scene is an essential scene as it turns the neutral space into a political space. Here, there are different levels of subversion. First, the four young women demand to be considered as just that: young women. Not young women from the *banlieue*. Not young women of color. Just young women. Secondly, this dance scene stands for Sciamma's attempt to grant visibility to these young women. The camera is not only signaling the spectators gaze, but also the director's gaze upon these girls. As for form, we can point out the blue lights which come to glorify their ebony skin color. Furthermore, when the girls are lip-synching to most of the song, they suddenly start singing, which illustrates quite literally Sciamma's second intent to give them back their voice.

(SLIDE 18) The choice of an all-black cast registers with Sciamma's resolution to create a space of visibility for young women of color. Here, it seems to me that Sciamma is addressing one of the shortcomings of French cinema: she denounced in a couple of instances an "absence", and is indeed referring to the lack of diversity in French cinema and the rarity of opportunities for young, black, French actresses, whether they be professional or non-professional. Indeed, like journalist Mathilde Blottière puts it so elegantly, (SLIDE 19) "black skin on the red carpet is indeed a combination that Cannes does not offer very often" ("peau noire sur tapis rouge, c'est une association que Cannes ne nous sert pas souvent"), as Karidja Touré, who plays Marieme was nominated for the award of Most Promising Feminine actress in 2015, which was awarded to white actress Louane Emera for her role in *La Famille Bélier*, yet again underlining here the fact that Cannes, metonymy of French cinema, still might not ready to let these actresses of color shine bright like diamonds.

Conclusion : A space of discussion

(SLIDE 20) We have seen how, depending on the space they find themselves in, young women from the *banlieue* perform either codes of masculinity or codes of femininity, in order to subvert the *banlieue* girl identity tied into their essence. Performance thus appears as a way to counteract essence, but is neither a subversive enough nor a sustainable enough tool to escape such stigma, as the young girls are always marked as female bodies or as women of color. And I believe this is what Céline Sciamma tries to address here.

Indeed, by tackling the question of the social stigma associated with skin color, we need to give credit to Céline Sciamma for being openly political and for challenging usual representations in French cinema. Of course, Sciamma's legitimacy to talk about the experience of young black girls was questioned by the press, to which the director answered that for her, the process of blossoming as a woman and finding your own femininity is a universal process, so a young, black woman from the *banlieue* just like Marieme could be the voice of such a journey. She is aware of the risk she took by opting for an all black cast but she decisively chose to (SLIDE 21) "avoid diversity": "c'est esthétique, c'est un parti pris politique. La peur, serait un casting de la diversité, avec une petite bande parfaite, qui serait un équilibre des quotas, et ça pour moi, ça aurait été avoir peur." // ("it's an aesthetic choice, it's a political, committed stance. Going for a diverse cast would have meant yielding to fear. Going for the perfect little group, meeting all the right quotas, for me, is what fear looks like.", my translation.)

Although we can object that it is hardly realistic to talk about universality of journeys when tackling serious themes such as race, class and gender, which might point to the fact that, just like Kassovitz in 1995, Sciamma might not be fully aware of her privilege, *Bande de Filles* still makes an essential intervention in the world of French cinema and beyond, by succeeding in representing different layers of marginality in terms of race, class and gender, as it explores the different spaces where those young women can exist. Sciamma thus needs to be acknowledged for opening up a *space* of visibility in which the invisible can be seen, but also for opening up a *space* for discussion as she intentionally seeks out to rehabilitate marginalized, stereotyped bodies, thus situating herself as an advocate of the decolonization of the imaginaries. (SLIDE 22)

On decolonization – “decolonizing the *banlieue* girl”:

- Colonization is the process of a group of people (in the colonial context, the Europeans nation) establishing and maintaining its domination over one or more territories or one or more groups of people deemed “inferiors” (Black people in the African colonies, or the Australian aborigenes for instance.)
- Decolonization is thus the process of reversing this domination process, and allowing the colonized party to become self-determined. The process of self-determination usually implies some kind of non-violent revolution
- In *Bande de Filles*, Marieme is emancipating herself from domination, hence the idea of Sciamma trying to “decolonize the *banlieue* girl identity”; to allow self-determination, in opposition to social determinism.
- I believe that decolonization is also a reformatting of modes of thinking: in a more academic perspective, I am very interested in the decolonization of the *imaginaires*, of the imaginaries, and more specifically, the imaginaries of gender. The way I see it, people have a colonized, gendered mind, that frames what masculinity and femininity is supposed to be (blue for boys, pink for girls for example). Decolonizing the imaginaries would be to question the typical ideas we have associated with gender. This also works with class and race. The brain is like a wounded muscle that needs physical therapy: it needs to be re-educated, rebooted, to get rid of these pre-conceptions.